In Reply To MacDonald, Hung and Crawford, 1995, 'Prehistory as propaganda'

Helen Wickstead
Insititute of Archaeology, UCL

Prehistory as polemics? Beyond objectivism and relativism

The most recent criticisms of 'traditionalist' standpoints and the 'New Archaeology' are set apart from those of earlier commentators in the strength of their rejection of the ideals of objectivity and empirical proof. This feature of post-processual archaeologies is the hotly disputed core of many of the conflicts that currently divide western archaeology. Anyone present at the 1992 Theoretical Archaeology Group debate among Barrett, Tilley, Binford, Renfrew, and Klejn, or the seminar at which the 'Prehistory as Propaganda' paper was read, would have witnessed the impasse that sometimes arises in these discussions. The debate is often phrased in terms of a confrontation between objectivist and relativist positions, a struggle that goes back at least 400 years in the social sciences. Although MacDonald, Hung and Crawford raise a number of interesting questions in their paper, such as the extent to which academic archaeology is, or should be, involved in popular archaeologies, I propose to focus on a related theme which they address, the issue of 'objective' and 'subjective' approaches to the past. I shall argue that current debates in archaeological theory suffer from a damaging polarization between positions perceived of as objective and subjective, which are misleadingly equated with the designation of 'science' and 'non-science'.

Many writers, including the post-processualists, have questioned the suitability of the methods of empirical science for the social sciences. This discussion has been flawed on either side by a misconception of 'science'. For example, advocating an 'interpretative science of man', Taylor (1979) argues that the natural sciences have had some success in attaining their ideal of a 'science of verification'. They have 'found an appeal beyond differences of intepretation', a goal that the social sciences cannot and should not strive for. However, the natural sciences are not the sciences of verification Taylor describes. Interpretation and judgement are inherent in all science, even the natural sciences. In empirical science logical method is only for testing the truth of statements, not for deciding whether the statements should be accepted or rejected on the basis of such tests. Acceptance or rejection of conclusions is always based on the subjective judgement of the researcher (O'Meara 1989: 359). Most practitioners of empirical science recognise that science is practised within a social, historical and psychological matrix and incorporates a subjective element. Even MacDonald *et al.* are 'not so naive as to argue that a strictly objective study of the past can exist' (MacDonald et al. 1995). The most recent reassessment of science's claims to objectivity has been prompted by the observations of historians and sociologists of science. These studies point to the historic instability of previously well established scientific theories. It is argued that scientists construct scientific theory, even scientific fact, through 'an ongoing (irreducibly social and political) process of negotiation among various participants in the research' (Wylie 1992: 45). This suggests that the 'even playing field' or 'scientific high ground' envisaged by MacDonald *et al.* is simply illusory.

MacDonald *et al.*, among others, accuse post-processualists of relativism. This

charge stems from the rejection of scientific methods such as 'testing' as a means by which competing theories about the past may be evaluated. Thus Hodder imagines 'no security, no robustness, no proof', only 'continual debate and approximation' (Hodder 1986: 94). Shanks and Tilley (1987a: 111) argue that:

> There can be no question... of testing in terms of a verificationist or falsificationist strategy. This is because there is literally nothing independent of theory or propositions to test against.

It is alleged that post-processualism entails extreme relativism because it denies scientific methods of validation. In fact, post-processualism does propose ways of evaluating different pasts, although these are not based on a foundation of objectivity. Whilst encouraging 'radical pluralism', Shanks and Tilley stress that they 'do not mean to suggest that all pasts are equal' (1987a: 245). They advocate a 'value committed', or 'critical archaeology', in which 'the validity of a theory hinges on its intention and interest; it is to be assessed in terms of the ends and goals of its archaeology, its politics and morality' (1987b: 213). If politics and morality are the standards by which the validity of 'multiple pasts' are judged within post-processualism then it is a gross mischaracterisation to suggest that Shanks and Tilley 'open the road wide for Fascism' (MacDonald *et al.* 1995: 7). Ironically, the critique of hyperdiffusionism and its links with the politics of black and white supremacists presented in 'Prehistory as Propaganda', is very much in keeping with Shanks and Tilley's project of a critical archaeology.

The 'dangers' to archaeology presented by the supposed extreme relativism of post-processualism have been exaggerated. Neither Hodder nor Shanks and Tilley argue that 'reality is a chimera', or 'unknowable', or (especially in the works of the latter) 'that one interpretation is as valid as any other' (Kohl 1993: 16). Hodder asserts a real, knowable past by urging the evaluation of past contexts against present contexts, 'so as to achieve a better understanding of both' (1986: 170). Shanks and Tilley state that a real past exists (1987a: 110), and that it may 'subvert the legitimacy of the present' (1987b: 213). They affirm the reality of the past by emphasising the limits set by the data on interpretation. They argue that archaeological data should resist relativism by persistently refusing to be moulded to the expectations of archaeologists (*ibid.* 104):

> ...archaeology would amount to an exercise in narcissistic infatuation if it only amounted to a deliberate projection of present concerns onto the past. The archaeological record itself may challenge what we say as being inadequate in one manner or another. In other words the data represents a network of resistances to theoretical appropriation.

This assertion contradicts their earlier argument that there can be 'nothing independent of theory'.

Wylie, who would probably not categorize herself as a post-processualist, offers some interesting ideas about how contending theories may be evaluated and errors identified when the claims of empirical science to objectivity are no longer plausible (Wylie 1993). Her understanding of archaeological interpretations is in some ways similar to the concept of a 'network of resistances'. She argues that archaeologists routinely exploit a 'tacking process' which results in interpretative conclusions that

depend on various lines of reasoning whose strength derives from the fact that they draw on different ranges of background knowledge. These strands of evidence and explanation may be compelling when taken together, because it is highly implausible that they could all incorporate compensatory errors. Wylie contends that the cumulative weight of these disparate, multi-dimensional considerations of evidence, data, reasons, and arguments can be rationally decisive. It is the mutual constraints invoked by these independent sources which prevents extreme relativism.

The dichotomy between objectivism and relativism is, to borrow the phraseology of Bourdieu, one of the sterile antinomies of the social sciences. I have attempted to dismantle some of the antagonism between these concepts, and to blur the distinctions between the standpoints which, it is alleged, represent them. It has been suggested that claims to objectivity and accusations of relativism in archaeology are, at the least, overstated. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that some critiques of post-processualism are based not on a careful reading of its texts, but on parodies of some of its ideas (Kohl 1993: 19, notes). It is unfair to accuse post-processual archaeology of collaborating in the ideological manipulation of the past by totalitarian regimes, when it is clear that it would vigorously oppose such archaeological 'readings' of the past.

Post-processual literature now makes a valuable contribution to a number of areas of study. This is not to say that it is without limitations. It is liable to be inaccessible to many people who aren't familiar with contemporary social theory, (MacDonald *et al.*'s 'jargon-riddled diatribes') however, it has addressed questions of how the past should be presented to the public (eg. Shanks and Tilley 1987a: chapter 4). It is true to say it is an almost entirely Western phenomenon, though not always parochial in its concerns. The dismissal of any methods regarded as anti-humanist or 'scientistic', and a tendency to be unnecessarily critical (post-processualism has its own 'philosophy of NO') foreclose some potential directions for research. Archaeologists should not feel forced to ally themselves exclusively with any set of approaches. It could be argued that the macro-scale, 'generalising' analyses of cultural systems favoured by processualism and the small-scale 'particularizing' studies of symbolism and social practices preferred by post-processualism are in some senses complementary. If this is the case then the interests of the discipline are best served by leaving behind the confrontational rhetoric and polemics employed by both sides in the present debate.

References

Hodder, I. 1986. *Reading the Past.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kohl, P. L. 1993. Limits to a post processual archaeology (or the dangers of a new scholasticism), in Yoffee, N. and Sherratt, A. (eds.), *Archaeological Theory: who sets the agenda?*: 13-19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacDonald, K. C., Hung, F. Y. C., and Crawford, H. 1995. Prehistory as Propaganda. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 6: 1-10.

O'Meara, T. 1989. Anthropology as empirical science. *American Anthropologist* 91: 354-69.

Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1987a. *Reconstructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1987b. *Social Theory and Archaeology.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Taylor, C. 1979. Interpretation and the science of man, in Rabinow, P. and Sullivan, W. M. (eds.), *Interpretative Social Science: A Reader*: 25-70. Berkley: University of

California Press.

Wylie, A. 1992. Gender Theory and the Archaeological Record: Why is There no Archaeology of Gender?, in Gero, J. M. and Conkey, M. W. (eds.), *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory*. 31-54. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wylie, A. 1993. A proliferation of new archaeologies: Beyond objectivism and relativism, in Yoffee, N. and Sherratt, A. (eds.), *Archaeological Theory; who sets the agenda?* 20-25. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.